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Will They Classify Even the Alphabet?

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President Reagan has signed a new executive order that vastly increases the power of Administration officials to stamp documents "classified." Intended to protect our country's secrets from falling into enemy hands, this order actually will be used to keep almost everything secret.

Such overclassification will in turn breed contempt for the classification stamp itself and encourage Government officials to leak any information that would promote their political interests.

The Presidential order is thus a bad one, and should be rescinded.

An executive order is a directive by the President to officials in the executive branch of the Government. Since World War II, Presidents have issued such orders to guide officials involved in military and foreign affairs in deciding what information to keep secret. An executive order needs no vote or even debate by Congress to gain the force of law.

Sadly, President Reagan's new order reverses two decades of painstaking efforts by Richard M. Nixon and Jimmy Carter to strengthen America's security system.

The goal has always been to limit classification to what truly threatens national security. Thus, a document was previously classified only if its disclosure would pose an "identifiable" danger to national security.

Under the new order, any vague threat will do. Similarly, the categories of classifiable information identified in the old rules were specific and clearly set out. Under the Reagan order, all "systems" or "plans" or "projects" somehow "relating to national security" can be stamped classified.

(Would interstate-highway maps thereby become classifiable? Representative Glenn L. English, chairman of the Government Information Subcommittee of the Government Operations Committee thinks so.)

Finally, when a document does not really pose a threat to national security, the earlier rules allow the responsible official not to classify it. Under the new order, classification would be mandatory whenever it is at all possible.

The effect of all this classification is no mystery. Before President Nixon began the process of tightening up classification standards, similar policies prevailed, and classification was almost automatic.

Among the thousands of documents that were classified was a history of the Vietnam War. When that document was leaked, the famous Pentagon Papers case resulted. Justice Potter Stewart of the United States Supreme Court, in his opinion in that case, summed up the unfortunate effect of lax classification policies: "when everything is classified, then nothing is classified." Anything, that is, might be leaked.

This paradoxical result is actually quite understandable. Wide powers of classification bring about the indiscriminate use of the classification stamp.

Vital national secrets are of course stamped, but so are politically embarrassing documents (such as the Pentagon Papers) or any piece of paper that seems vaguely sensitive. With so much technically secret, no one knows what is truly secret. Officials come to see the stamp as a political tool that allows them to keep secret what would hurt them and to leak what they want publicized.

Two recent events illustrate this phenomenon. In January, a White House official told The Washington Post that a Defense Department study placed the cost of the Administration's defense buildup at \$2.25 billion, rather than the \$1.5 billion that had been reported. Then, in March, a Pentagon official explained to a group of reporters "exactly how the Soviet Union could wipe out the U.S. military system with 'two or three' well directed missiles." This was done, The Daily News reported, to convince the public that a new de-

fense program is needed. The first of these disclosures should never have been kept from the American people; the second is a vital military secret that perhaps should never have been revealed to the public. But both were officially "secrets" — and both were leaked.

With all these leaks, how can we protect our nation's security?

Again, the answer comes from Justice Stewart's opinion in the Pentagon Papers case, and again is paradoxical: "the hallmark of a truly effective system would be the maximum possible disclosure."

Only when strict standards limit classification to what truly bears on national security will the classification stamp be honored.

President Reagan should therefore summon the courage to rescind the order he has just signed, and commission another that will tighten the present system still further.

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